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La Carpio May Be Costa Rica's Worst Ghetto

By Michael Miller (<http://qcostarica.com/author/michaelmiller/>) on 31 January 2015

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Very few expats living in Costa Rica have ever heard of or ventured into La Carpio, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Costa Rica.

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COSTA RICA JOURNAL – Very few expats living in Costa Rica have ever heard of La Carpio. Even fewer have ever visited it. There is a good [reason why](#).

La Carpio is a district of San José that lies to the west of Hospital Mexico. It is one of the poorest places in all of Costa Rica. It is also one of the most dangerous.

La Carpio is a remote section of San José between two very polluted [rivers](#) and next to the city's massive landfill. It is where thousands of refugees from the Nicaraguan civil war of the 1980's and 90's have settled. They are mostly undocumented immigrants, and they have been mostly ignored by the governments of San José and Costa Rica.

Today there are about 35,000 residents tightly packed into an area that is characterized by appalling poverty, high [unemployment](#), a high crime rate, and homes made from packing crates and corrugated tin. Most of the current residents are Nicaraguans or their children. (Children born in Costa Rica are recognized as Costa Rican citizens.)

Last week a group of concerned visitors toured La Carpio. The tour was sponsored by the Friends of the Rio Torres and was hosted by Gail Nystrom of the Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation. Ms. Nystrom and her group have spent more than two decades working in La Carpio.

As bad as the district looked to the eyes of the visitors, Ms. Nystrom reported that there has been much progress made over the past twenty years. Some (but not all) of the roads have been paved. Most of the homes now have water and sewage connections from the city. Most of the homes now have cement (as opposed to dirt) floors. A medical clinic has been established.



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Some of the worst slums in Costa Rica are in La Carpio, a district in the western part of San Jose. Photo: Michael Miller, Qcostarica.com

A couple of schools have been built, but no high school yet. Ms. Nystrom says, "We will soon have some students from La Carpio graduating from high school, and some will go on to university." She says this will be a milestone for the community.

The adults in the community who are fortunate enough to [find jobs](#), work at cleaning houses, picking up garbage and doing lawn maintenance. "Costa Rican society depends on them." Says Ms. Nystrom. She also quickly points out that these people have a strong work ethic (when they can find work). In her years in La Carpio, she tells the group, no one has ever asked for a handout. They ask for work.

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This walking path, recently stair-stepped with cement, takes residents of La Carpio to [the banks](#) of Rio Torres, where the poorest of the poor live. Photo: Michael Miller, Qcostarica.com

The group of visitors was led down a steep pathway to the bank of the Rio Torres, where the poorest of the poor live. This river runs through downtown San José (behind the city zoo) and by the time it gets to La Carpio it is little better than a flowing cesspool.

One of the most memorable sights of the tour is a suspension foot-bridge that crosses the fetid Rio Torres. It is made of 4 cables and some wooden slats. This foot-bridge would be a shaky way to cross the river even if it were in good condition. But vandals have stolen some of the wooden slats . . . more than half of them. Some good Samaritans, in an attempt to [repair](#) the bridge, have mickey-moused the remaining slats together, so that if you are brave enough, you can make it across.

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This suspension foot-bridge across the polluted Rio Torres has been ripped apart and cobbled back together. Only the brave . . . and the desperate use it. Photo: Michael Miller, Qcostarica.com

Ms. Nystrom tells us that you will often see mothers with their children crossing this rickety remains of the bridge. Why do they risk it? From the bridge they can walk to their jobs cleaning the houses of wealthy people. By crossing this dangerous bridge, they will save the 45 cent bus fare.

Much has been done by Gail Nystrom and her Costa Rican Humanitarian Foundation to help the people of La Carpio. But much remains to be done. If you would like to [learn more](#) about this group and their work among the poor, you can view their [website](#) here: CRHJ (<http://www.crhf.org>).



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Residents of La Carpio make do with what they can find. Here barbed wire is used for a clothes line. Photo: Michael Miller, Qcostarica.com

Costa Rica is a beautiful country, but not without problems. [Although](#) the La Carpio ghetto is nowhere near Downtown San Jose, and it is far removed from the up-scale parts of the Central [Valley](#), it is still part of The Real San Jose.

Costa Rica's private transportation services AVANTI Costa Rica.

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About Michael Miller

Michael Robert Miller, with over forty years of business experience, has travelled extensively in the Far East and Central America. He has been visiting San José, Costa Rica since the 1980's and has



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